

VZCZCXRO7584  
PP RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR  
DE RUEHSI #0081/01 0151211  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 151211Z JAN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0765  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 000081

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/08/2018

TAGS: [KRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [RU](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: A LOOK INSIDE THE INFLUENTIAL GEORGIAN  
ORTHODOX CHURCH AND THE IMPACT OF ITS CONSERVATIVE WING

REF: A. 08 TBILISI 2411

[B](#). 08 TBILISI 2430

[C](#). 08 TBILISI 2459

[D](#). 08 TBILISI 2269

[E](#). 08 TBILISI 1983

Classified By: AMB JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Begin Summary: The Georgian Orthodox Church wields a great deal of influence in Georgian society and ON the Georgian Government. Much of the credit goes to the very popular Patriarch Ilia II, who recently II celebrated his 76th birthday and 31 years as Georgia's Catholicos-Patriarch.

Ilia II has masterfully balanced the discordant voices within the church, pulling into the fold the ultra-conservatives whose views are often radically different that of the main church. However, behind the scenes, with the current Patriarch's advancing age, the wheels appear to be already in motion sorting out who will become his successor. Insiders consider it likely that his successor will again be a moderate voice within the church. It is unlikely that his successor will come from the church's more radical conservative elements for two reasons.

-- First, anyone selected as Patriarch would currently be a bishop, and there are no bishops within the conservative elements.

-- Second, the Government, which works closely with the church, would not be happy with a conservative as the Patriarch, considering the vast influence such a post would bring.

Nevertheless, conservatives remain strong, due in large part to separate funding streams, that give conservatives access to their own money. Some have hinted that when push comes to shove, whoever the Patriarch is, he must accommodate this conservative element. The more influence conservative anti-western elements have on the selection of the next Patriarch, the more difficult it will be for the Government of Georgia to gain public support for outward-focused policies. End Summary.

The Exodus and Evolution of a Conservative Faction

[1](#)2. (C) Emboffs recently met with two experts on the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and its Patriarchy. According to Giorgi Andriadze, Member of the Executive Board of the Patriarch's Foundation, in 1997 the GOC underwent a schism which saw some seven priests leave and form a separate offshoot. These seven priests, over a two year period, gradually drifted back to the GOC, with the exception of one, who emigrated to the U.S. Two of the former congregants of the schism church, brothers Zurab and Gela Aroshvili, became priests, and now head the schism church of 300 parishioners, concentrated in the Tbilisi suburb of Dighomi. The schism church has cut all official ties to the GOC, although this

group actually shares the same principles of a larger and stronger conservative group within the GOC.

13. (C) Father Giorgi Zviadadze, First Priest of the GOC, and also Deputy Rector of the Seminary and Sioni Church, is adamant that "schism" is inappropriate to describe the events which occurred in 1997, as "schism" denotes that a separate branch of the official church now exists, a claim he refuted.

According to Andriadze, the much larger conservative group within the GOC, around which all other smaller conservative groups are arrayed, is led by Archpriest Rafael Karelin, an ethnic Russian, who came to Georgia 20 years ago from Sukhumi. Archpriest Rafael, who is not a Georgian speaker, converses in Russian, and employs a wide array of Russian language religious literature. This conservative group within the GOC counts among its adherents roughly a dozen priests, who lead churches in Jvari, Sioni, and Tbilisi, as well as new church on Chitadze Street near the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (Note: Although a priest may be conservative, the aforementioned ideology may not trickle down directly to his congregation. It may just be an ideological dispute at the clergy level. End Note.)

#### The Three Commandments of the Conservative Branch

-----

14. (C) The basic tenets of the conservatives are that the following all constitute heresy: ecumenism; observing Christmas on December 25 (vice January 7); and participation in certain activities (sports, cinema, dancing--to include traditional Georgian dances and polyphonic singing). Singing during the services is done in one pitch, or "Greek" style.

TBILISI 00000081 002 OF 003

Andriadze said that it was conservative elements that forced the Georgian Orthodox Church to leave the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1997. (Comment: Father Giorgi maintains that the GOC left due to the unacceptable nature of WCC initiatives. According to him, initially WCC was created as a forum for the dialogue of different denominations, but later started advocating joint rituals like joint prayers, which the GOC could not accept. The GOC cannot hold full communion with other denominations and found the aforementioned unacceptable. Even so, the GOC still sends an observer from time to time. End Comment.)

15. (C) Archpriest Rafael, Priest David Isakadze, and an inner circle of 10 priests determine in large degree what constitutes heresy. Andriadze told Poloff that the conservatives are strong due to their independent sources of funding. Andriadze opined that the GOC lost its initiative in the sphere of education and this initiative has gradually been captured by the more conservative elements. These conservative elements sell religious items, and print their own newspapers (Mrveli, or Congregation) and books, which they sell at their own shops on Lesilidze Street (old town pedestrian area) in Tbilisi.

16. (C) Father Giorgi told Poloff that there was a small number of priests whose ideas about Orthodoxy were incorrect, although he did not portray them as numerous nor powerful. He characterized them as lacking theological education which often led them to misinterpret the teachings of the church. He specifically mentioned the misconception that true Orthodox believers could not attend performances or films, noting that Ilia II himself attends the Opera. Those priests, who had been appointed perhaps in the early days of the revival of the church in Georgia, were needed at a critical time when there were no priests to perform weddings and funerals in the hinterlands of Georgia. Father Giorgi went on to say that the total number of bishops has increased from four to 37 over the last years, to make up for gaps in the regions. He added that in theory there is no cap on the number of bishops who could serve at one time, but the issue would be where to assign them. The Holy Synod, which is made

up of the Patriarch and the bishops, convenes twice a year. If someone wishes to nominate a potential candidate for the position of bishop, it is done in this forum.

#### What Makes the Conservatives Different?

-----

¶7. (C) The religious tenets of the conservatives differ significantly from those of the majority. Andriadze cited the example of how the group's views differ on the fate of a child who dies before receiving baptismal rites. Conservatives believe that the unbaptized child is relegated unequivocally to hell, whereas the majority believe that this is ultimately God's decision. In addition, conservative elements within the church have been known to cause more than a few headaches for the Patriarch, including blocking his vehicles when he is due to arrive in some regions, or actively protesting in front of the Patriarchy itself. Andriadze calls this group, "Cosmopolitan Orthodox," characterized as straying far from the "traditional" Georgian values that constitute a particular brand of patriotism.

¶8. (C) Father Giorgi did say that as a result of these misinterpretations of doctrine, a special commission was established in 2002 to approve any publications which go out under the aegis of the church. In this way, these inaccuracies are corrected and not further propagated. No doubt, the establishment of the above commission was aimed at controlling these conservative elements. The committee, made up of 12-15 people, clergy and laity alike, is headed by Metropolitan Grigol Berbichashvili, from Poti. The Patriarch's nephew, Bishop Dmitri Shiolashvili, from Batumi and Skhalta Eparchy in Ajara region, is a prominent member of this commission. Andriadze opined that this filtering mechanism to weed out objectionable publications may not work as effectively in practice as in principle.

#### Impact on the Succession to Ilia II

-----

¶9. (C) Andriadze told Poloff that even now there is discussion over who will be the next Patriarch, given the advanced age of the current spiritual leader. Although there are 3-4 (out of 37) bishops who are being seriously considered, Andriadze considers the most likely successor will be Shiolashvili. He has a good relationship with the conservative elements and main church alike. Additionally, Shiolashvili knows that he will need the base support of conservative elements to become Patriarch, so he may reassure

TBILISI 00000081 003 OF 003

his uncle these conservative elements are not so damaging in exchange for their tacit approval. Thus, some less objectionable tracts may not undergo strict scrutiny. Father Giorgi was loath to talk about what would happen after the current Patriarch's death, but did say that the Patriarch has already recorded his choice of successor. In theory, the Holy Synod would meet within 40 days of the Patriarch's death, consider his choice of successor, discuss other candidates, vote, and accept the majority decision. Father Giorgi did not predict who any likely successor would be, adding, "If some fanatic comes to the top of the Church, it will be a disaster."

#### Armenian and Russian Brothers

-----

¶10. (C) According to Andriadze, conservatives do not have a formulated stance on the explosive issues of the disputed churches between the Armenian Apostolic Church and GOC. He discounted the idea that the conservative elements would block settlement of ongoing church property disputes. In fact, he said, they do not even think about this issue (Ref A-D). Andriadze did say that he raised the issue of disputed churches issues two years ago, and again most recently with

the Patriarch to broach while in Moscow. He maintains that the Russian Church will most likely continue the policies of the deceased Patriarch Alexy II, i.e., giving lip service to GOC jurisdiction over the separatist territories, but carrying out their own Russian Orthodox Mission. Father Giorgi was adamant that the Russian Orthodox Church cannot revoke the jurisdiction of the GOC over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as this is canon law. The Russian Church is keen not to have direct confrontation with the GOC, as the GOC may then swing its support to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church which currently subordinate to the Russian Church but seeks independence.

#### Ramifications

¶11. (C) Conservatives within the church are inward-looking, coming out in strong force against ideas which either challenge the church's traditional sphere of authority or do not mesh with their definition of correctness. As Georgian political aspirations of joining NATO and EU have them looking outward, these two diametrically opposed philosophies could potentially clash. Georgia's aspirations may require them to implement policies to permit inclusiveness of minorities who are not ethnically Georgian and do not ascribe to GOC practices. As Father Giorgi himself said, "Georgian identity is based on ethnicity and religion." As conservatives do not believe in ecumenism, more conservative elements may not support dialogue outside their faith to foster relationships to resolve issues with those they consider privately as "heretics."

¶12. (C) Ilia II himself thus far has been supportive of Georgia's government and its policies on transatlantic integration and return of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Should he be replaced with someone who is more conservative or less adept at tempering the more radical conservative elements, this could potentially hinder Georgia's progress. Given that the total number of bishops is not capped, in theory, a more radical priest, should he have the backing of a majority of the other bishops, could be appointed a bishop and thus climb to the rank of Patriarch. Previous Prime Minister Gurgenidze last year expressed his concern about the church, portraying it, "As an unstoppable force and anti-western" (Ref E). While Father Giorgi discounted the power of the conservative elements, his concerns about the future Patriarch being a radical hint that there privately may be some apprehension that this could occur. Given Father Giorgi's position and his visible devotion to the Patriarch, though, he would be unlikely to mention a sizable opposing force within the church without implying that the Patriarch is not in full control. Father Giorgi's position as First Priest gives him a special distinction, as it is through him that all lower-level clergy must coordinate to float up ideas to the Patriarch outside of bi-annual Holy Synod meetings.

TEFFT